Allen Frame on following your curiosity



July 19, 2017 - Allen Frame is a photographer, writer, and visual artist who lives in New York City. He teaches photography at the School of Visual Arts, Pratt Institute, and the International Center of Photography. He has also taught photography workshops in Mexico and Russia. He was born in Mississippi in 1951 and graduated from Harvard University in 1974. When asked to describe how one stays engaged with their work, he says, "Creative work is always about following your natural curiosity. It's always about moving towards what feels mysterious, especially at a time where everything has become so familiar."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3038 words.

Tags: Photography, Process, Beginnings, Multi-tasking, Success, Independence.

You do a lot of different things these days, but people know you as a photographer. How did you land on photography as your primary medium?

I originally wanted to be a filmmaker and my childhood was very oriented to films. I was a big Hollywood fan. In Mississippi, I couldn't see a lot of films that I might have wanted to see, but I still saw a lot. I saw everything I could. I collected books that had stills from foreign films. When we were in high school, I wrote a screenplay adaptation of *The Sound and the Fury*. When I interviewed at colleges, my standard question was, "What kind of film societies do you have on campus?" Because I was not a Visual Art major in college, I usually couldn't get into film classes.

I was a double-major in Art History and English. I guess the most pivotal moment for me as a young person was seeing a group show at the Fogg Museum in Boston, which included Diane Arbus. It was totally mind blowing to me. I thought the black and white prints were ugly. I didn't know what to make of that. There was just some terribleness about it, but it really impressed me.

I hadn't really thought about photography as a possibility as opposed to making films and I don't remember what I had expressed to my family, but my father suddenly gave me a camera. His best friend was a *National Geographic* photographer who recommended this particular kind of German camera. So I started photographing things and I happened to take my first class at this community center near Radcliffe where I was taught by a graduate student named Henry Horenstein. Later on, he wound up writing the most popular instructional manuals on photography and has published many books of his own work. He started teaching at RISD around that time. He was just a few years older than me, but having a great first teacher—not so much for the technical stuff but for the attitude—was so important. He himself was a student of Harry Callahan, who was a great and very humble photographer. He somehow transmitted that humility to students with this idea about loving your subject matter. That made me feel really comfortable since I'm pretty techno-phobic and didn't really relate to the technical aspects of photography.



Alfredo, Mexico City, 2008

It took me about a year to figure out what I was doing. I took a semester off, my last semester of my senior year, and I went to Mississippi. I worked as a waiter and I started taking pictures *that* I realized, for the first time, really represented my voice. So then it was manageable and it felt very psychological. I didn't really have to worry about technique too much. Taking photos was very intuitive.

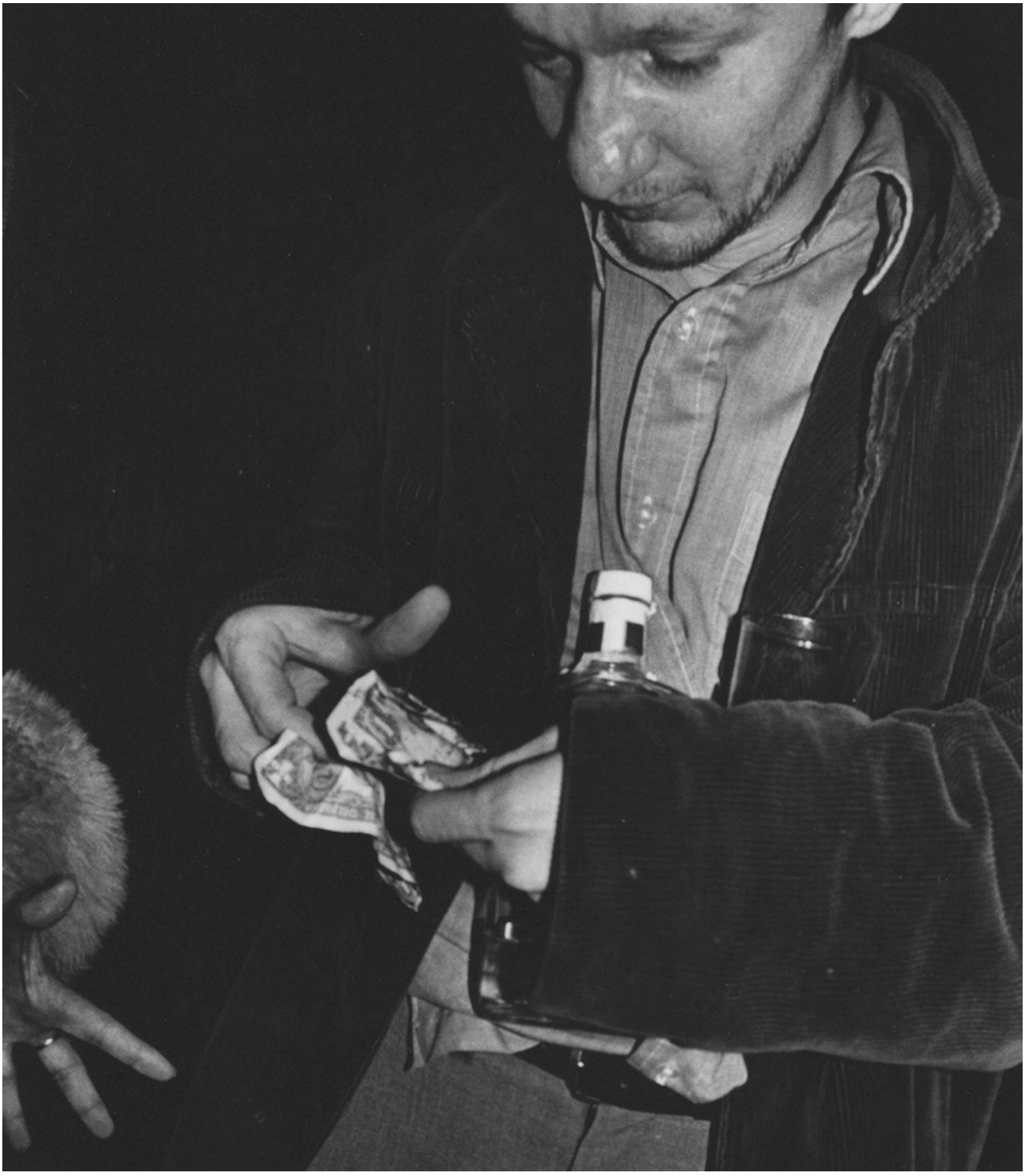
Around 1980 I was in New York and I was asked to if I wanted to play Jack Nicholson in Gary Indiana's play *The Roman Polanski Story*. The cast was full of all these downtown figures like Jack Smith, Bill Rice, Taylor Meade, Cookie Mueller, John Heys, and I thought it would be a way of getting to photograph them. What happened was that I got really interested in theater. I actually took an acting class, but I wound up being more interested in directing. I directed a few things, including *Sounds in the Distance*, an adaptation of a David Wojnarowicz piece which had about eight actors, including Nan Goldin, performing various characters. We did it in this outdoor garden behind Bill Rice's apartment and the East Village. What I wanted to be was a playwright who directed their own work.

I know you were in New York and London during the early '80s doing a lot of theater stuff. Were you taking photos this entire time also?

Not really. Not in London. I was mostly interested in experimental theater. Coming back to New York after that, I

really wanted to direct my own work. I did a couple of more experimental things that were based on interviews with people in my family and I used my photographs and my mother's photographs.

That then just dissipated. I think that the reason why is that when I came back to this scene in the late '80s it was the height of AIDS and a lot of the theater people I had worked with before I left were sick or had died or were going through that. The thing that brought me solidly back to photography was being in a big show about AIDS, curated by Nan Goldin, that included the work of many people who had died. There was a big political reaction around that show and that just made photography seem highly relevant, so I just started again.





David Kain, Money, Mississippi, 1975

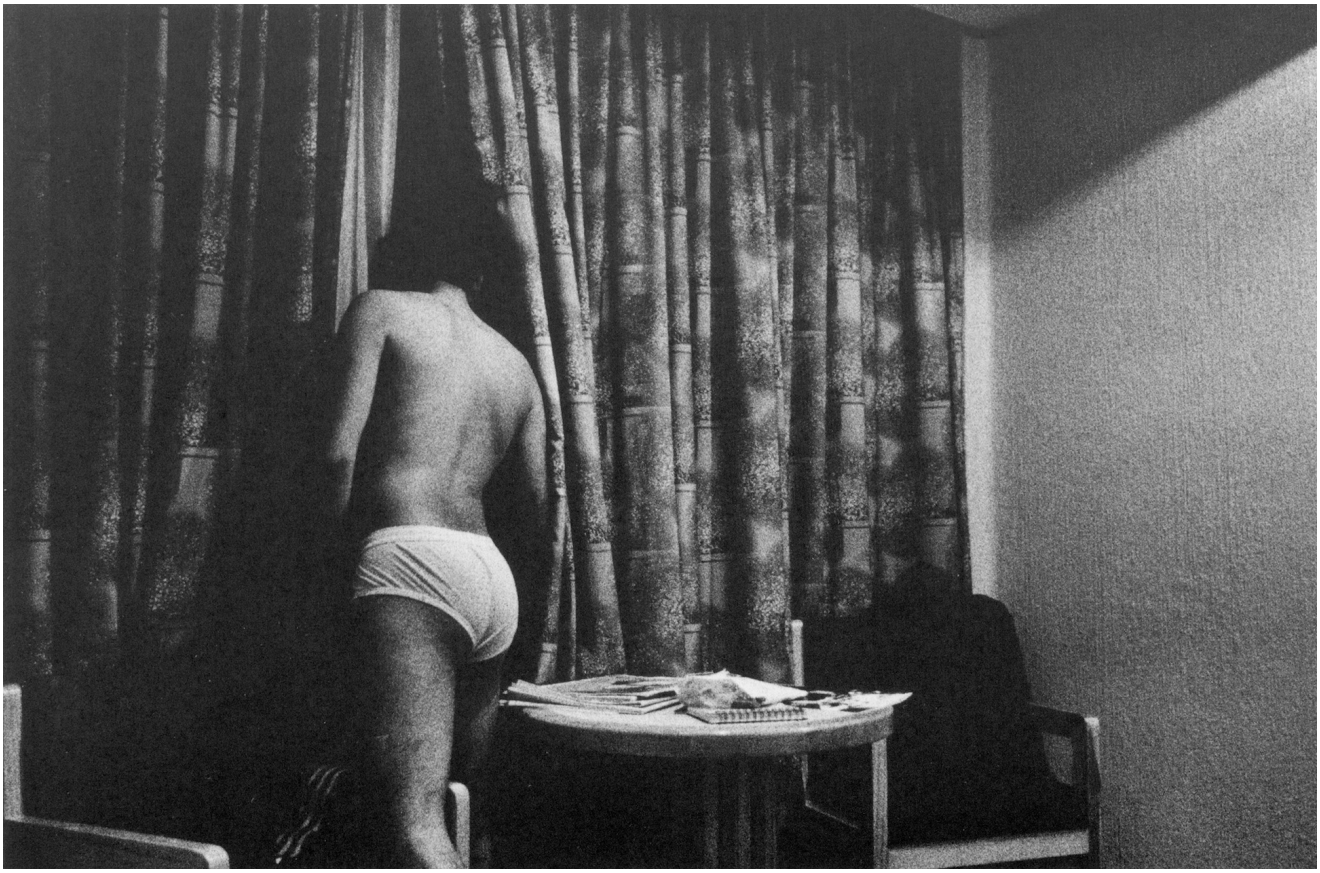
It was just all photography until about about seven years ago. I realized that a situation unfolding in my family was play worthy. Since I hadn't been able to influence people to not pursue dysfunctional things in my family, I realized that I, instead of being a passive observer, had to write about it. So I took notes on the developing material for about a year and a half. I have this massive amount of notes. It was hard to get started with, but eventually I did it. Over the last couple of years, I've had several readings of it.

In the course of that project, I would ask myself, why I had ever left theater? Why I had ever stopped? How could I have gone away from it because it felt like such a comfortable place? The discipline to write is such a different discipline than to photograph. With photography I just have to schedule time. Maybe with writing that's all you have to do too, but the focus is so much more intense, and photography I find so easy. Once I'm doing it, it's just about reacting and being intuitive. Whereas, for me there's a lot more intensity about the pressure to sit down and write something.

Did you find that throughout doing all of this other stuff that your relationship to photography changed?

The big change for me with photography has had to do with my age. When I was younger, I could rely on my lifestyle to generate the content because I was surrounded by it. Eventually there's a point when I realized that these things were not happening around me in the same way, and I had to kind of force them. Getting into my 50s it was interesting that I seemed to have this persona, which was an image that I didn't really identify with or recognize. I began to stand off from it and really look at it. I was this particular older man, unrecorded. What is he up to? What is he doing? I've never been very big on self portraiture, but it seemed suddenly easier to access that content, either in photographs or in the plays and poetry that I've been writing. This stranger that I've become to myself is really interesting to me. It's a lot more interesting to me than how I seemed to myself when I was younger.

I'm teaching this class at the School of Visual Arts right now called "The Life You're In: The Pathos of Autobiography". That's kind of how I feel. What is this odd life that I'm in? A lot of it has to do with my ideas about aging, and also other people's ideas about it, and what they project. When you start to think about how the clock is ticking—what are you gonna do with those last 20 years? All of that is really interesting to me.



Martin, Mexico City, 2000

So, I’m still working photographically in the way that I’ve always worked, but there’s another way that I’m working that involves these other pieces that are more conceptual, mixing new photographs with photographs from my archive that might be appropriated or might be my own or might have been done by my grandmother or some mentor or whatever. I’m putting together images to access some of these things that I couldn’t say before, that I wasn’t saying as a writer and I couldn’t say in the photographs that I was working on before. It’s challenging because it’s such a different way of working for me—the idea of constructing something as opposed to just seeing something and responding in a photograph.

Speaking of teaching, do you find that students tend to view art school as a springboard to a professional career? Are they concerned about what happens after school ends?

It’s interesting that it doesn’t come up in my classes that much. I bring it up towards the end, and they’re not ready to talk about it even then. I bring it up at the end of the senior year at SVA, but it’s so unreal to them that it just seems to go in one ear and out the other.

This is why a lot of people contact me later. That conversation usually happens down the road when they’ve been out of school for a while and they’ve grappled with some of the hard realities of it. I think there’s a huge fallacy that permeates the art world that it’s all about knocking on doors and climbing a ladder and approaching some kind of hierarchy. What I say over and over is that it’s not about that at all and that should be good news. What I really think is so much more important are the peer to peer relationships, which should just be organic and real. People should nurture those relationships and really pay attention to them, hold on to them and really respect them. Not on the friendship level necessarily, but on the professional level. You don’t have to like a person to like their work, but if you like their work, you should stay in touch with them and you should see what they’re making and they should know what you’re making. Tending all of that takes a lot of energy, but that’s where the energy should be spent. If you do that things will come to you organically and they will be good. You

should be paying attention to what's going on in your field so that you can root for your peers as much as you can and so that they can root for you. This isn't for the opportunistic sake of networking, which I hate the idea of, but because every artist needs to be challenged and stimulated constantly and that's the best way.

There seems to be a constant ongoing conversation about how social media has not only affected our cultural psyche, but how it has also affected the arts. Because of things like Instagram there is this notion that everyone now fancies themselves a photographer. What do you make of that?

This question keeps coming up from people when I meet them and say I'm a photographer. They'll ask whether I'm threatened or challenged by the rise of social media and the ease of posting images and getting your work exposed that way. I'm not at all. I think the growth of photography as a medium has much more to do with the acceptance of photography as art and its ubiquitousness in the art world, whereas it used to be stronger in the magazine world, which is a world that has kind of died. A lot of those opportunities have collapsed, but the one really strong area which is always developing is photography as a fine art. I think it's good if fine artists can post their work on Instagram or other social media.

There's a huge difference between people doing their online snapshots and floating from subject to subject every time they take a new picture. There's a difference between doing that and actually developing a real body of work. It's as hard as it ever was—if not harder because of the general proliferation of art in the world—to create a body of work that says something specific that is interesting now to think about. That's why students don't ask about career stuff that much in my classes, because they're trying to make a few more images in that body of work and it's really hard to do that. They want to leave with portfolios that are coherent and interesting to look at. Maybe with the proliferation of online photography there are more good photographers, but there are not necessarily more great photographers.



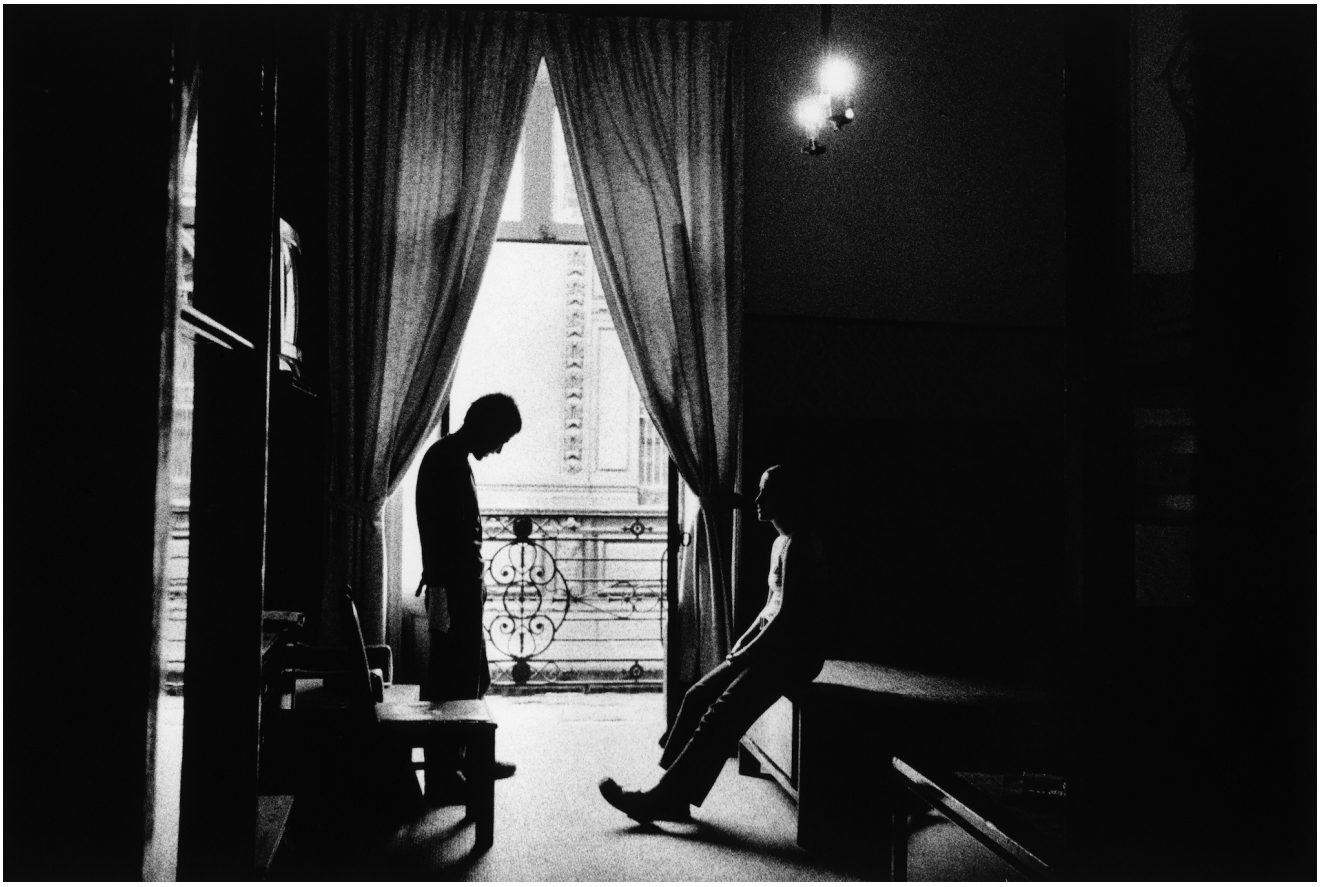
Butch and Frank, Berlin, 1984

Has your process for taking photos changed a lot over the years?

It has been really hard to photograph here in New York City for many years because everything's so familiar. It wouldn't be hard for me to write about anything here and things happen that I want to write about all the time, but photographically between my own work and seeing all of my students' work, which is largely created here in New York, it makes it that much more difficult all the time to even think about taking a picture here.

Recently I have photographed a lot in Mexico because that's like a new world for me. It feels fresh to me, but also has certain resonances with growing up in Mississippi. I photographed someone a couple weeks ago that I have been trying to photograph for two years, and it's been awhile since I did a shoot like that where somebody agrees to come to this place and I get to photograph them for a few of hours.

Changing my work has involved doing tons of research and pushing myself to figure out what excites me now and what I respond to. I realized that it's trying to get back to some sense of strangeness, freshness, off-beatness, and weird corners. Sometimes you become numb to your surroundings without realizing it. For me it has been about exploring the obscure and the marginal and trying to tap into those same feelings that I had about things as a child. For me at least, creative work is always about following your natural curiosity. It's always about moving towards what feels mysterious, especially at a time where everything has become so familiar.



Santiago and Paola, Mexico City, 2002

Images courtesy of Gitterman Gallery

Allen Frame recommends:

Pam Butler is an under-the-radar painter known for street posters of girl art plastered across downtown NY in the

early ’90s. Her paintings of women, both intentionally naive and fearlessly emotional, are irreverent and critical. She will take on the Miss America Pageant in a show of watercolors, photographs, videos, and sculpture, curated by the provocative artist Leigh Ledare at Baxter St @ Camera Club of NY, opening Sept 23rd.

Darrel Ellis was an African American New York artist who died at the age of 33 in 1992. He was one of the stars of Nan Goldin’s famous exhibition about AIDS in 1989, *Witnesses Against Their Vanishing*, where he showed his self-portrait paintings based on the photos Robert Mapplethorpe and Peter Hujar took of him. The year he died he was posthumously included in MoMA’s New Photography show, and in 1996 I curated a major retrospective of his work at Art in General. When he was 22, he discovered a box of negatives taken by his father of their family before he was born and then reinterpreted them for the next decade in experimental photos, ink drawings and gouaches, and works on canvas. His is one of the most affecting and beautiful interdisciplinary bodies of work on family and identity. Since ’96 his work has been seen only in a couple of group shows.

Laura Elkins, an artist in Washington, D.C., originally from Oxford, Ms, had a show in a private gallery in Harlem, Tikhonova and Wintner, that was one of the best shows of 2015. Her searing, mesmerizing self-portraits as first ladies—Mamie, Jackie, Lady Bird, Hillary, etc, all the way through Michelle, are a phenomenon, as well as her first ladies as minimum wage workers at McDonald’s et al. It’s amazing that such an intense and political body of work could still be under the radar.

Cassandra Langer is a poet, artist, art historian, and author of a recent definitive biography of lesbian painter Romaine Brooks. Langer’s own watercolors, made over the last decade, are enigmatic, ethereal figurative compositions that puzzle and muse over the end of a romantic relationship. Reminiscent of both Matisse and Pierre Klossowski, their psychological perspective on a long-term lesbian relationship is very contemporary.

I’m currently writing an essay about the paintings of Nat Meade. He makes portraits of guys that look like nerdy, droll private eyes, a mix of high and low that reminds me of the shock and beauty of Lisa Yuskavage’s work. It’s work that is obsessive, quirky, funny, and stunning. He will have a double show of this work in Oregon in the fall, at the Schneider Museum of Art in Ashland, opening Oct 5th, followed by a show at the Froelick Gallery in Portland.

Anthony Urrea is the missing link in the Boston School of Photography that includes Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, Jack Pearson, and Mark Morrisroe, only he’s just 22, lives in New York, and just graduated from SVA. But his playful and seductive polaroid work of queer friends and lovers recalls those ’70s/’80s artists, and his own self-portraits punctuate the pastel panorama of their uninhibited lives.

Name
Allen Frame

Vocation
Photographer

Fact

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